

Memo from a Mormon:

In which a troubled young man raises the question of his Church's attitude toward Negroes



Jeff Nye, author of this Memo from a Mormon, is shown in Temple Square, Salt Lake City, Utah, standing beside the statue of Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon Church. In background is Mormon Temple.

WITH THE POLITICAL rise of Gov. George Romney of Michigan, a Mormon, and the thrust of the Mormon Church into the urban life of our nation, the position of the Negro in the Mormon Church is gaining new attention. There has been a good deal of confusion surrounding this question for some time. Non-Mormons have been confused. As a life-long Mormon, I have been, too.

The Mormon Church taught me that the Negro was not equal to the white in terms of religious rights and opportunities. It taught me that the Negro was cursed with loss of God's priesthood and that the evidence, or mark, of this curse was his dark skin. Consequently, the Negro could not hold the priesthood in the Mormon Church and was thus unequal to the white in a very important sense. But the reasons for this doctrine, and the scriptural evidence behind it, had always seemed unconvincing to me.

Then one evening, I came across an article on the subject that quite surprised me. This article, printed in the *Deseret News*, a Salt Lake City newspaper owned by the Mormon Church, quoted at length one of the highest officials of the Mormon Church, Joseph Fielding Smith, president of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, a body that serves directly under the President of the Church and his two counselors in directing affairs of the Church.

President Smith, whose position has traditionally been the stepping stone to the presidency of the Church, is the Church's doctrinarian. He officially answers the questions of Mormon youth in the Church's monthly magazine, *The Improvement Era*.

The *Deseret News* quoted President Smith as saying:

"The ignorance on the part of writers who do not belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in relation to the views of the 'Mormons' on the status religiously or otherwise of the Negro is inexcusable. There is no doubt that in the campaign of George Romney enemies will play up the Negro question to the very limit."

Then President Smith made a statement that surprised me. He said:

"The Latter-day Saints, so commonly called 'Mormons,' have no animosity toward the Negro. Neither have they described him as belonging to an 'inferior race.'"

President Smith went on to quote a passage from the *Book of*

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Mormon that says Christ "denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free. . . ." Next came his major point: "The [Mormon] Church can do more for the Negro than any other church on the face of the earth.

"What other church can baptize them by divine authority and confirm them and give them the gift of the Holy Ghost? What other church can promise them with assurance that they can if they are faithful and true before the Lord enter into the celestial kingdom? . . .

"What other church can make a better promise? Moreover we know whereof we speak, for the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored with all its powers and divine authority.

"The Negro who accepts the doctrines of the Church and is baptized by an authorized minister of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is entitled to salvation in the celestial kingdom, or the highest heaven spoken of by Paul.

"It is true that the work of the ministry is given to other peoples, and why should the so-called Christian denominations complain? How many Negroes have been placed as ministers over white congregations in the so-called Christian denominations?"

President Smith concluded the article by saying, "It is strange that so many persons are tried and condemned by well-meaning people because of assumed notions and prejudice without a true knowledge of the facts."

This article said just the opposite of what I had learned throughout my teen-age years as a member of the Church.

A few minutes after I had read it, I began to wonder about the knowledge I had acquired as a Mormon.

In the weeks that followed, my inquiries led me to the same answer that I had before reading President Smith's words: The Negro is *not* equal to the white in the Mormon Church, and equality is impossible as long as the Church denies the priesthood to the Negro. This is the policy of the Church.

The Negro is a junior partner in my Church. He is a junior partner because he cannot hold the priesthood, and the priesthood is the foundation of the Church. Only males hold the priesthood, but females share it through marriage. A Negro woman who, according to Mormon doctrine, is also cursed, cannot share the priesthood through marriage.

Today, if a Negro becomes interested in the Church, he can join, and he can be baptized and confirmed a member by the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. He can come to most of the church meetings. But he cannot pass the sacrament, as the 12- and 13-year-old boys do. He cannot prepare the sacrament, as the 14- and 15-year-olds do. Nor can he bless the sacrament or perform baptisms, as the 16-, 17- and 18-year-olds do. Nor can he perform any of the other duties of the lesser, or Aaronic, priesthood.

A Negro cannot hold the higher, or Melchizedek, priesthood, or perform any of its numerous and significant functions. He cannot offer the confirmation prayer for a person who has been baptized. He cannot offer the prayer to heal a sick relative or friend or anyone else in the name of the priesthood. Most important, he cannot enter the temple to perform the covenants of the temple. This restricts him from an important blessing, since temple work in the hearts and minds of many Mormons is their choicest earthly blessing.

Deprived of the privileges of the temple, the Negro cannot be married to his wife and sealed to his family *for eternity*. This is the highest covenant that a Mormon may solemnize. It includes various secret and sacred rites and rituals that take place in the temple. Nor can the Negro perform vicarious priesthood ordinances for the dead,

which is the other major purpose of the temple. These special, secret rites are a real spiritual blessing to many Mormons. The sanctity and beauty of the temple inject a serene spirituality into the Latter-day Saint. Here, he is renewed and refreshed, ready to face daily life with reinvigorated faith.

Lacking the priesthood, a Negro can never hold any position of leadership in the Church, because the priesthood is the prerequisite for any position of authority.

As for scriptural evidence to support this policy, there is very little. There are four books of scripture that are used in the Mormon religion: the Bible, the *Book of Mormon*, the *Doctrine and Covenants* and the *Pearl of Great Price*. Out of the four volumes, Mormons can offer only three verses that support, although not conclusively, the Negro doctrine. These three passages are found in the *Pearl of Great Price* and are a part of a revelation given to Joseph Smith, who founded Mormonism in 1830. They appear in a section of the *Pearl of Great Price* called the "Book of Moses." In Chapter 5, verses 40 and 41, the book says:

" . . . And I the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. And Cain was shut out from the presence of the Lord, and with his wife and many of his brethren dwelt in the land of Nod on the East of Eden."

And in chapter 7, verse 22, the same "Book of Moses" says:

"And Enoch also beheld the residue of the people which were the 'sons of Adam' and they were a mixture of all the seed of Adam save it were the seed of Cain, for the seed of Cain were black, and had not place among them."

Cain, because he had killed Abel, was cast out from the presence of the Lord. Cain and his seed were black. This is all the information given to us. And this is all the scriptural documentation Mormons offer in support of the Negro doctrine. From this, the Church has concluded that the Negro, or a person with "Negro blood" (whatever that means), cannot hold the priesthood in the Mormon Church. Yet the word "priesthood" is not mentioned in the three scriptural

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passages. If we consider the remainder of available scriptural evidence, we find contradictions. Nowhere in the four books does Christ make a distinction between black and white. Possibly one might postulate that this important issue was lost in the Bible through translation or accident. But the *Book of Mormon* is the second witness for Christ, and, according to leaders of the Mormon Church, it is a pure and undefiled translation.

In the article, President Smith quoted a *Book of Mormon* scripture, 2 Nephi 26:32-33. The complete text of Verse 33 says: "For none of these iniquities come of the Lord; for he doeth that which is good among the children of men; and he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile."

The *Book of Mormon* thus offers testimony that Christ "denieth none," regardless of color or race. It says nothing else to contradict this egalitarian view. With this sort of evidence to be found in Mormon scriptures, and even quoted by a high official of the Church, how can Mormons continue to teach and accept a condition of Negro subservience? It is puzzling, unless one keeps in mind the attitude of overwhelming apathy that Mormons seem to have toward Negroes. Unfortunately, the very existence of the present Mormon Negro doctrine adds to this apathy. In fact, it gives Mormons a God-sanctioned reason for feeling superior to the Negro.

This is where the Mormon question about the Negro merges into the larger question of racial prejudice. The best way to perpetuate racial prejudice is to provide as little real association between races as possible. Prejudice thrives on ignorance. The Mormon's Negro doctrine reinforces the ignorance of most Mormons about Negroes.

True, this policy seems to have been feasible up to now because there are few Negroes in the Mormon Church, because few whites have objected to it and because there have been scarcely any outside pressures. Most Mormons seem indifferent to questions concerning the Negro. But times are changing. The Mormon Church, like so many others, is making major efforts to acquire new members through missionary work, particularly in our urban centers. And as these young



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JACK TIPPIE

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Mormon missionaries move about in our cities, they are coming into contact with the realities of the race problem today. They are seeing, at firsthand, the great drive of the Negro for equality, for his full measure of freedom.

Can the principle of equality be reconciled with the Mormon doctrine of denial of priesthood? This is the question that troubles

me today. Perhaps the new conditions that shape our world today will produce a new view. If we Mormons believe that God is directing our Church, we can hope that God is preparing a new revelation that will revise our present Negro doctrine. If we do not believe this, we can hope that the more liberal element of the Mormon leadership will produce a doctrinal change as the problem intensifies. JEFF NYE

EDITOR'S NOTE

The article from the *Deseret News*, referred to by Mr. Nye, appeared in an issue of that newspaper dated July 14, 1962. William B. Arthur, managing editor of LOOK, asked President Smith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to comment on the article during an interview with him last summer at his office in the Mormon Church's office building in Salt Lake City, Utah.

"I stand by every word in the article," President Smith said, after reading it aloud in Mr. Arthur's presence. "The Mormon Church does not believe, nor does it teach, that the Negro is an inferior being. Mentally, and physically, the Negro is capable of great achievement, as great and in some cases greater than the potentiality of the white race. He can become a lawyer, a doctor, a scientist, and he can achieve great heights. The word 'inferior' is indeed unfortunate."

Mr. Arthur asked President Smith if a Negro boy can pass the

sacrament in the Mormon Church, as 12- and 13-year-old white Mormon boys do. President Smith replied, "No." He then was asked whether Negro boys could prepare the sacrament, as 14- and 15-year-old white Mormon boys do. The answer was "No." "Can he bless the sacrament or perform baptism, as the 16-, 17- and 18-year-old white Mormon boys do?" Mr. Arthur asked. Again the reply was, "No."

"The Negro cannot achieve priesthood in the Mormon Church," President Smith said. "No consideration is being given now to changing the doctrine of the Church to permit him to attain that status. Such a change can come about only through divine revelation, and no one can predict when a divine revelation will occur."

"I would not want you to believe that we bear any animosity toward the Negro. 'Darkies' are wonderful people, and they have their place in our Church."

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